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Review: **“He was made man”**

Slavoj Zizek & John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*

(The MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2009) ISBN 978-0-262-01271-3 (312 pages)

Accompanied by a social scientist and armed with the ‘use / mention’ distinction, Daniel Dennett has recently undertaken an investigation into the means by which increasingly sceptical and atheistic members of the clergy manage to continue to function in their official capacities. It is an intriguing and sometimes touching account of how ordained non-believers serve and support their (presumably) believing congregations. John Milbank may draw some comfort from the fact that the subjects interviewed so far come from North American protestant and non-conformist communities, in other words from traditions and institutions where belief is characterised in and by the individual’s relation with God. There is no essential liturgical or sacramental manifestation of the divine, as it were, apart from that relation. Notwithstanding the fact that these non-believing and suffering ministers are outside orthodoxy, Dennett’s study has implications for the very notion of orthodox teaching when it comments on the ambiguous role accorded to theology. Theology both, on the one hand, encourages a historically and critically informed encounter with scripture and doctrine and, on the other hand, forges a professional identity – the minister becoming one whose difficulties with faith themselves now belong to faith as challenge, temptation and possibility. Theology, on this reading, turns its attention to the concepts ‘God’ and ‘belief’ rather than to God and belief. It

mentions them and, in so doing, produces texts and a discourse superficially similar to other approaches to religion (psychological, anthropological, sociological, etc), but it does so under the illusion or pretence that it is using them as the believer praying in the pew would use them. In line with his memberships of an atheist “troika” (with Harris and Dawkins) and quartet (with Harris, Dawkins, and Hitchens), Dennett sees the dilemma less as a religious crisis (and so a legitimate topic for theology) than as a crisis with religion, one requiring a non-religious and non-theological understanding and diagnosis. Although he is not looking for a villain, someone to blame for the sustaining of an error and a prevailing unhappiness or self-deception, Dennett clearly does hope that the re-telling of the development of religious thought will lead, in the long term, to an emancipation from religion. In the shorter term, some of these ordained agnostics and atheists may be encouraged to admit to their lack of belief, a gesture – the non-conversion testimony – that might have a salutary effect. Dennett et al’s insistence that this confession of non-belief, the dawning sense that there is nothing (no God) there, must not be permitted to count as a further religious experience requires an absolute distinction between theology and philosophy. Philosophy is only to be respected, rationally and scientifically, if it leaves no room for theology, a ‘discipline’ whose contemporary task is simply the endless resuscitation of ‘belief’ in belief, an expression of the will to believe where belief is no longer possible. And no positive (Chestertonian) ‘paradox’ is to be read back into this latter predicament. Setting aside mendacity and hypocrisy, there are only two options: either one believes as true believers do or one allows theological subtleties to

ventriloquise one's unbelief. The sophistications and sophistries of the latter are to be reduced either to the former or, preferably and finally, to atheism.

It is interesting to see how, for the new atheists, although they have no particular philosophical interest in him, Kant must be protected from the consequences of his own critical treatment of theism. The theoretical reintroduction of God as an 'idea of reason' and the practical appeal to the necessity of that idea for morality must be subjected to a secular interpretation of enlightenment rationality. Kant must himself really be an atheist. This has consequences not only for Kant exegesis but also for the narrative the new atheists want to tell about how things stand with secularism. One of the consequences of this narrative should be immediately apparent. There is literally nothing of genuine philosophical interest in the Kantian and post-Kantian re-engagements with the question of religion and theology – nothing to be conceded to Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, or Kierkegaard. We move from a proper take on Kant to a characterisation of its speculative, metaphysical, and, yes, theological receptions as simply attempts to sustain the unsustainable.

Milbank and Zizek invite us to an exchange between two voices (one theist, one atheist) that presupposes the philosophical worth and necessity of the post-Kantian philosophico-theological European tradition and moves easily and unapologetically within its terms. They begin with Hegel, and with what Hegel saw as the need for philosophy to take the incarnation seriously. They find in the speculative handling of Christian history a genuine attempt to face up both to what is scandalous in the

teaching of Christ and to what makes of Christ himself something and someone monstrous, a monstrous divinity – a divinity made man. And they sketch two contrasting ways in which thought might successfully attend to incarnate divinity: paradox and dialectic. Construed as paradox, the incarnation, for Milbank, sustains theism; construed as dialectic, it turns Zizek towards what for him can be the only end of religion, the material event of atheism. This atheism, Zizek argues, in what is the clearest polemical moment in the book, is the most consistent way of engaging with what must be meant by the incarnation, and it is itself profoundly *Christian*.

For atheists of Dennett's party, the book can surely only appear as a sort of madness. Its editor, Creston Davis, in the long introduction, insists that the perpetual return of the question of religion attests to the failure of secularism and is leading, if it has not already led, to a full scale shift in the self-understanding and self-organisation of the humanities. Critics, scholars, philosophers and historians are once again looking to theology for guidance, to reacquaint themselves with how and why matters of tradition, language, and identity necessarily remain irreducibly religious. For both Milbank and Zizek, everything that can be conveniently gathered under the heading of 'postmodernity' is here best analysed as the symptom and the non-reflective limit of a modernity whose essentially Christian character and content it is unable and unwilling to recognise. Philosophical 'postmodernism' (including it seems figures such as Heidegger, Derrida, and Levinas) is thus the avoidance of the truth of modernism, namely its being intrinsically Christian. Davis and, I presume, the theologian Milbank think such a diagnosis warrants revisiting the issue of the status and role of theology.

Zizek – the Christian atheist – seems willing to play along, if only for the sake of an entertaining conversation, one in which, with a flourish not unworthy of Derrida, he can appear as the most orthodox of participants and indeed as the ‘better Christian.’

Perhaps surprisingly, throughout the book Hegel is accompanied by G.K.Chesterton, and it is Chestertonian paradox that Milbank will oppose to Hegelian dialectic and that Zizek will endeavour to read differently against both Milbank and Chesterton himself. But the Chesterton, Zizek has in mind is not primarily the religious author of *Heretics* and *Orthodoxy*, but rather the writer of detective and mystery stories. He cites the conclusion to the story ‘The Oracle of the Dog’ in which Father Brown complains of the tendency of his companions to search for supernatural explanations for natural phenomena such as deaths, thefts, disappearances, and the behaviour of dogs, a tendency that arises, as he says, from their unwillingness to accept the truth of four simple words: ‘He was made man.’ If they would only allow this one supernatural event – the event of Christ’s incarnation – they could find and detect the real material reasons for the crimes and disturbances confronting them. It is Father Brown’s faith that underwrites his rationalism. Zizek is drawn to the recent attempts by Bayard to show how certain detective stories might be read against the solution offered in their closing paragraphs. Thus the confession that concludes Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* can be taken as a deliberate untruth, a means of protecting the undetected murderer. Zizek reads Father Brown’s sentence in a similar fashion. ‘He was made man’ – if one could only accept that in its literal truth then what an advance that would be for reason and religion. And in its literal truth it says that God

became man, and from that moment and henceforth, there is and was no God. There is and was no longer access to the transcendent, there is no longer a transcendent deity, and crucially there is no justification for treating this 'no longer' nostalgically, no room for the pathos of mourning and memorialising. Any such move would be tantamount to rejecting what must be meant by incarnation: He was made man. That's what became of him. That's where he went and where he is. Žižek is happy to have found a Father Brown wholly compatible with a materialist reading of Hegel. For Milbank, although everything is wrong here, there are also grounds for happiness: (1) Žižek is talking about religion and theology; (2) a correct account of Chesterton's (and Father Brown's) thoughts about the incarnation would be an excellent way of demonstrating what is missing in Hegel and Žižek; and (3) what is missing, orthodoxy, requires both the acceptance of paradox and a tradition and a church able to preserve it. So the exchange unfolds, with Žižek – Bayard-like – teasing out phrases and arguments in the mystical and theological traditions that admit of non-mystical materialistic interpretations, and Milbank returning them to the context within which they operate paradoxically, expressions of the inexpressible, crystallisations of oppositions bound to no speculative or dialectical result, composed and protected doctrinally in accordance with doctrines themselves paradoxical, and paramount among them the doctrine of the trinity. It is an exhausting process. Each of the three contributions (two from Žižek, one from Milbank) moves effortlessly from text to text and tradition to tradition. What makes it worth following is for the most part Žižek's humour. However numerous the commentaries and exegeses, the engagements with thinkers as diverse as Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa, Schelling, and Lacan, however broad

and impressive the range of high and low cultural and literary examples, and however extensive the scholarly footnotes, the qualifications and addenda, there is something unconvincing about the whole project. Milbank is keen to convince himself and us that he sees in Žižek someone seriously concerned with how we might re-think our relations to theology and ontotheology, but Žižek's own points of entry into those traditions are often unargued for or rather simplistic. Eckhart is addressed primarily by way of Schurmann's interpretation and, far more problematically, the discussion of mysticism and Orthodoxy is determined in great part by Lossky's introductory and overdetermined glossaries. The fact that the word 'orthodoxy' is allowed to remain unclarified throughout seems less to do with a considered acceptance of ambiguity than with a strange lack of interest, as though it really didn't matter. It fluctuates freely between the title of the Eastern church, the title of a book by Chesterton, and the general designation of what counts as authorised doctrine and belief, the signature of a sacred tradition.

Beneath the personal dynamics of the exchange, the myriad ways in which Milbank and Žižek manage to convince themselves that the other is serious, for example, in finding Chesterton deeper than Hegel or in reconciling Chesterton with Hegel, or in having to choose between Chesterton and Hegel, what is going on is actually fairly straightforward and it can be restated as a dispute in the reading of Hegel. When Hegel's philosophy of religion admits its own philosophical, historical, and religious necessity, there is a coming together of the systematic and the phenomenological. Is not the becoming-concept of God precisely a speculative dramatising of the

difference between use and mention? Philosophy becomes Christian when it must think and work with the concept of 'God' now self-consciously presented as concept. There is then an intriguing doubling in Hegel's relation to Christianity, one that seems to be already operative or glimpsed even in the earliest writings on religion. The incarnation, God's becoming man in the person of the historical Jesus, is traced in God's becoming concept, God's becoming 'God', in the dialectical transition from religion to philosophy. There is a step from "becoming Christian" in its religious sense to "becoming Christian" in its philosophical sense. Now how do Milbank and Zizek stand with respect to this feature of Hegel's thought? To the extent that, for the purposes of this book, each of them concedes the Christian character of modernity and demands a thinking capable of comprehending that character, they accept the Hegelian move. But each does so by a curious sleight of hand. Milbank accepts the move but argues that the speculative identity of philosophy and theology cannot lead away from the church without a dogmatic imposition of dialectic on paradox, the trinity staged as historical process. Zizek accepts the move and the staging but argues that it must be read against, on the one hand, the pull of paradox and, on the other hand, against any representation of the process as supernatural. Milbank chides Zizek with failing to take the trinity even as seriously as Hegel does. By this stage, the reader knows what Milbank means, but it is difficult not to smile at the complaint. Of all the criticisms levelled at Zizek over the years, this is my favourite. Hegel was bad enough in his impoverished trinitarianism but even with the bar set this low, Zizek fails to reach it. There is a sense however in which Zizek not only has little serious interest in the trinity as a doctrine but also has no need of it. At the heart of his

interpretation of Hegel is a linearization: God – Incarnation – Spiritual Community.

The event of incarnation finds its speculative identity in the establishing event of the church, and it is in the materialist understanding of the (Pauline) community that Zizek's reading of Chesterton's 'He was made man' finds its validity. Doctrinally, that is as Milbank's paradox, the trinity suppresses this narrative.

When he finds it difficult to sustain his image of Zizek as a recently appointed theological colleague, Milbank is inclined to describe him in tragi-comic fashion, as an absurd but not un-Christ-like figure. Zizek, aware of the failures of 'postmodernism' and the 'postmodern' announcements of the ends of metaphysics, must operate in a context still in thrall to this thought and culture, and in that context the seriousness of his non-relativistic treatment of religion can only seem preposterous. Milbank is far more ponderous in his use of 'postmodernism' than is Zizek who is quite content to multiply his cultural allusions and to refer sympathetically to Heidegger and Derrida. It is Milbank who wants certainty in his cultural critique and who in the end seems to collapse everything which displeases him into a Rortyan relativism. But one figure seems always to irritate Zizek. He is very funny about the ease with which Christian philosophers turn to Levinas, the manner in which they offer their Levinasianism as evidence of their sensitivity to Judaism and to Jewish thought. Zizek suspects that there must be something in Levinas that attracts this piety, this supposed alternative to Christianity that Christians can accommodate precisely because it declares itself to be a function of the non-accommodatable. But it is not clear to what extent anything here touches on Levinas's own work rather than on its

reception. And this leads to a larger question, one on which to conclude. Žižek introduces the idea of a counter-narrative in order to challenge the authority of linearity without simply dispersing and multiplying narratives. The counter-narrative whether it be detected in the text or read into it transforms everything. Bayard is perhaps just such a counter-narrator. Yet when Žižek considers the Gospels as a counter-narrative to the Old Testament and so to the Jewish Bible he seems to be repeating the most familiar and the most clichéd of linear narratives, one we find in Hegel. As counter-narrative to Judaism, Christianity supplements, completes, and subverts it. Christ both fulfils and exhausts Jewish prophecy, and transcends the remit of its laws. Nothing is strange here and no narrative, at least none told and taught by Christianity and Christian modernity is undermined or countered. When Levinas reads the strangers interrupting Abraham at prayer as the only answer one's prayers can ever receive, is this not an exemplary counter-narrative? And what is the practice of Talmudic reading if not the imagining and invoking of such counter-narratives? Žižek loves the hard sayings of Christ in the Gospels, the sayings that sit awkwardly with the dominant reception of the Gospels, the cursing of the fig-tree and the call to hate one's family. But although these sayings are seen as problems for the church and for the modern humanised community served by the church, they are not tested against the materialist narrative Žižek wants to endorse. Part of the appeal of the counter-narrative is its not belonging to the arbiter and the authorised teller of history and tradition. Levinas's readings and Talmudic readings more generally, among which one finds echoes of Christ's hard sayings, can always return to tell on Christianity in either its theistic or atheistic (materialist) guise.

Can we not imagine Dennett's response to much of this: Zizek is clearly an atheist in the only sense Dennett can acknowledge, and Milbank works and writes to sustain the faithful? However intricate his arguments and illustrations, Zizek's Christian atheism is not qualitatively different from what we find in Feuerbach, Strauss, or Marx, the left-Hegelian tradition that has always read the materialist counter-narrative in Hegel's dialectical drama of the trinity. And Milbank's objection can only ever come from a position Hegel would have to see as pre-Hegelian. Oddly what is missing here and in a book that spends so long mentioning him, is a *careful* reading of Hegel's double account of "becoming Christian". Zizek accedes to his materialist atheist Christianity by way of an *abracadabra* and an appeal to Father Brown. Milbank, gloomily surveying postmodernism all the while dreaming of the work theology might still do, names Gillian Rose as a partner in such an endeavour. But Rose's step, however controversial and however much she sometimes shared a distaste for the 'postmodern', was never simply back from Hegel into orthodox doctrine. What intrigued her was what, in Hegel, resisted both the left-Hegelian impulse and the often aestheticised appeal to paradox. What intrigued her was the philosophical and religious *meaning* of the dialectic. But that is another story for another time.

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